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A KEY TO MUNICIPAL REFORM.

BY E. L. GODKIN, EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK "EVENING POST."

THAT there was a time within the remembrance of men now living when there was a great deal of pride in the city and interest in municipal affairs, among the inhabitants of New York, admits of no doubt whatever. The municipal records, the newspaper reports, the biographies and diaries, and the memory of old residents, all agree that at one period, which only came to an end, or neared its end, about forty years ago, municipal offices were objects of ambition to really eminent citizens—that is, to men conspicuous for their high personal character, for their well-established social position, or their professional or commercial success. Such men were very glad to be made mayors, or to become members of the Board of Aldermen or Common Council, and the voters, or the appointing power, sought in these categories candidates for such offices as a matter of course, or, I might term it, as one of the ordinary and inevitable decencies of municipal government.

To illustrate this by example would take more space than an article of this sort will allow, but any one can readily illustrate it for himself by going over a list of the mayors, and inquiring what was the standing in the community of any one of those who held the office, say, down to the year 1846. Very much the same thing may be said of the members of the Board of Aldermen or Common Council, by whatever name it was known. There existed at the period of which I am now speaking, in as much force in New York as in any other city in the Union, the old Anglo-Saxon tradition of "respectability"—that is, the tradition which requires that the incumbent of an office of much authority or responsibility

shall be a conspicuous person, with whose history and character the community is familiar, and who is marked out for the place by the process of natural selection which produced the earlier American Presidents, and still produces the British Prime Minister, but which in all democratic countries shows a tendency to decay under the influence of the system of artificial selection, or nomination by conventions.

Of course this fastidiousness about the quality of municipal officers must have created, and, there is plenty of evidence to show, did actually create, a strong popular interest in city administration and a good deal of pride in the way the corporation was represented before the world. This is not saying that the city was nearly as well supplied with comforts and conveniences as it now is, or that its municipal machinery was nearly as perfect. It had no public water supply ; it was poorly lighted ; it had no system of public schools and little or no police, and was so primitive in its notions of municipal propriety that the pigs ran loose in the streets. Science and experience and increased wealth have put a hundred means and appliances of health and security within reach of the present generation which were by no endeavor attainable in those days. All that I contend for is that men at that time lived up to such lights as they had touching the best conditions of municipal life, and had a satisfaction in their citizenship which is now unknown.

To explain the change which has since taken place in the attitude of the more intelligent portion of the voters towards the municipality and its belongings is to explain the crisis through which municipal politics are now passing. For the honest truth about our municipal troubles is that they are due not so much to a particular kind of legislation as to a particular state of mind among the people ; and no suggestion of a remedy would be adequate or complete without some examination of this state of mind.

The change began, as I have pointed out in a former article in this REVIEW, almost immediately after the adoption of the constitution of 1846, which gave the suffrage to all adult white males. As the population of the city was then composed, the effect of this in city politics would have been, for a while at least, weak or insignificant, if it had not been that there was at the same time a sudden and marked increase in the immigration from

Europe, partly owing to the famine in Ireland and partly to the troubles on the continent of Europe during the years following 1848.

As the city grew, the majority adhered firmly to the Democratic party, while the State, after going through several permutations, finally settled down as Republican almost as soon as the Republican party came into existence. It is remarkable, and important, that the State Senate has had a Republican majority every year since 1854, except 1870, 1874, 1881, and 1882, and in these years the Democratic majority was very trifling. In the Assembly the Republicans have had a majority since 1854 in every year except 1862 (when there was a tie), 1869 and 1870, 1874, 1881, and 1882, but the Democratic majority in these exceptional years was, as in the Senate, very small. During all this period the city has given Democratic majorities every year except 1861. An explanation of this divergence of political opinion and feeling between the urban and rural population would need an article to itself. It is due, like other political and social phenomena, to a composition of causes. But it is not necessary for my present purpose to explain it.

The feature in this divergence to which I wish to call attention is its permanence, and the failure of the Republicans, though holding the State government for nearly the whole period in all its branches, to make any perceptible impression on the majority in the city. They began their attacks on it in 1857, by taking the control of the police force out of the hands of the city authorities, and have since then scarcely allowed a year to pass without some change in the city charter, or some redistribution of city offices, with the avowed intention of destroying the Democratic supremacy. These attempts, too, have been vigorously supported ever since 1861 by the lavish use of the enormous Federal patronage concentrated in New York through the custom-house, the post-office, and the Federal courts, and by a Federal act providing for the supervision of the local elections by Federal officers. About 1870 an effort was made by the late President Arthur to supplement these instrumentalities by the creation of a Republican "machine," intended to counteract the Tammany Society by the use of agencies similar to those employed by Tammany, and kept in operation by the use of Federal offices, just as the Tammany machine was by the use of municipal offices. To make it more

effective, a certain number of a then novel kind of politician in the shape of Republican Irishmen, typified by "Johnny" O'Brien and "Mike" Cregan, were enlisted in it, and became its leaders and managers. These men were meant to fight the devil with fire—that is, defeat Tammany by the use of its own arts. This device also proved a failure. It never was sufficient to rescue the city from the Democrats. The most it has ever been able to accomplish has been to secure to the Republicans a certain share of the city offices by bargains with the Democrats, made either through the Republican majority in the Legislature or by direct negotiation with the Tammany leaders in this city. During this long period the Republicans have been able to elect only one mayor, Mr. Opdyke, as a Republican, unless Mr. Havemeyer was entitled to that appellation—which I doubt. It would seem, therefore, as if the Democratic majority in this city were a fixed quantity, and as if its destruction by any weapons within the reach of its opponents were something which for practical purposes cannot be considered within reach, or even within sight.

The Republicans, although they undoubtedly comprise the more intelligent and well-to-do portion of the population, have no influence, intellectual or moral, on the bulk of the Democratic voters, and have in local canvasses no effective power of persuasion or conversion. This is a singular phenomenon. I doubt if the like of it is to be found in any other city, except possibly Paris. Neither the rich, nor the moral, nor the educated have in thirty years succeeded in making any impression whatever on the political opinions of the Democratic masses. In competing for influence over them, they have been always hopelessly distanced by the ordinary Tammany committee-men and district leaders. Neither through its books, nor its sermons, nor its newspapers does what is called the "Better Element" of the Republican party reach the Democratic rank and file. There has never been in the past forty years any successful political evangelization done by it in this city, although it spends millions in various forms of philanthropic and missionary effort. It and its agents are beaten at every turn, as political and moral influences, by the Tammany liquor-dealers and ward politicians.

In order to protect themselves against the grosser consequences of Democratic ignorance and corruption, Republicans have been compelled to fly to Albany and ask for some sort of

temporary relief in the shape of special legislation. This has had two unfortunate results. It has, in the first place, ended—it is to be hoped not permanently—in debauching the Legislature by presenting every year to it a rich community in the attitude of a suppliant for deliverance from some sort of local evil. This annually-recurring demand for legislative help against the local majority, generally made by people who are well known to be able to pay for it, has naturally led the members from the country districts to treat the city as the oyster of needy men, to welcome petitions for relief in particular exigencies, and to turn their attention away from the construction of any general constitutional framework of city government. To a large majority of the legislators in both houses, legislation about New York city is much the most attractive feature of their sessions. Without it their task would be exceedingly dull, and to many of them very unprofitable. Any one who goes over the newspaper records of the legislative work of the sessions of the last forty years will find that all, or nearly all, the great Albany struggles, excitements, and scandals have arisen out of some attempt to legislate touching the distribution of municipal offices.

Nor is the evil confined to the excessive or corrupt legislative meddling with city affairs, or to attempts to “strike” wealthy corporations through taxation. It is made almost as manifest in the reluctance of the party in power to provide for the most needful city improvements, owing to its unwillingness to intrust the spending of large sums of money to the local authorities. If the truth were fully known, it would be found that a good many of the local inconveniences from which we suffer—such, for instance, as the poor pavements of our city and the absence of rapid transit—were the results of Republican disbelief in the possibility of getting any great public work honestly executed through the instrumentality of Democratic officials. Republican legislators would probably dislike much, under any circumstances, to put large enterprises, involving the employment of a great deal of labor, into the hands of Tammany agents, but they are supplied with abundant and respectable excuse for this reluctance by the quality of the municipal officers whom we elect. The new court-house and the new aqueduct, the only two great municipal works attempted since the war, both proved large jobs in which local Democrats were the

chief actors. The aqueduct was saved in time, owing to the very audacity of the jobbers ; but both would furnish anybody who defends the kind of supervision now exercised by the State over city affairs with a justification in which it would be hard to pick holes.

From unwillingness to commit public improvements to Democratic hands, to bargaining with the Democrats for a share of the plunder, the distance is not great, and we see illustrations at every session of the Legislature of the strength of the temptation created by Democratic eagerness to get hold of the money. The strain on integrity which the situation creates on both sides is, in fact, greater than human nature can bear, even when it has not been trained in city politics. Nothing can well be more demoralizing for the country member of the Legislature than the power to regulate the affairs of a wealthy community to which he does not belong and whose interests he does not understand. Nothing, too, is more demoralizing for a minority in any community than the discovery that it need not try persuasion on the majority in order to accomplish its ends ; that there is a power outside to which it can appeal to enable it to have its way when elections go against it. Public spirit and a real interest in public affairs cannot shine in a situation of this sort ; and yet this is the situation in which the Republicans of the city have been living for thirty years. Under these circumstances civic pride has well-nigh died out amongst them ; gifts to the city, considering the enormous fortunes which have been made in it during the past fifty years, are extraordinarily scanty ; the tendency to regard the city as a place to make money in, but to live and die out of, has been growing steadily ; and the city is becoming more and more renowned for its dirt, disorder, and discomfort, as well as for its wealth and size.

It is not surprising, all these things considered, that, when we have reached a very bad pass, when there has been some display of more than ordinary dishonesty and incapacity among our city rulers, the first thing which some good people should think of is an expedition to Albany to get the charter changed, or to get somebody legislated out of office, or some officer's power curtailed. Two generations have grown up in familiarity with this sort of reform, and many people can hardly think of any other. Mr. Andrew D. White, the former president of Cornell University, through service in the Legislature, as well as through observation,

very familiar with the New York problem, is still so much under the influence of this Republican tradition that he read a paper at the last meeting of the Social Science Association at Saratoga proposing this very thing—that is, that we should ask for a change in the charter making the mayor and a good-sized Common Council elective on a general ticket to represent “politics,” and creating a “Board of Control,” with a veto on expenditures, to represent “property.”

All experience justifies us in believing that any such Common Council would be simply a hot-bed of politics, and would spend most of its time devising schemes for the abolition of the Board of Control, which it would doubtless accomplish before very long. The Board of Control, too, was an idea of the Tilden Municipal Commission in 1877, embodied in a constitutional amendment which the Legislature refused to submit to the people, and which would certainly have far less chance now than it had then. The truth is that, in the existing state of the New York mind about city government, we cannot bear any more Common Council than we have got; a small body elected by districts, and possessing no powers of any importance, is as much of this sort of machinery as is tolerable. It pleases the lower class of ward politicians, and gives them a few small places with salaries to fight for, and does the rest of the community no great harm.

As regards the finances, the present Board of Apportionment is probably as good a Board of Control as can be desired. It is composed of the mayor, the comptroller, the president of the Board of Taxes and Assessments, and the president of the Board of Aldermen—most of the men actually charged with the administration of the city and responsible for the amount of the expenditures. If we fill these places with first-class men, the board answers all our needs. If we do not, no board would improve our condition. A board representing property-holders simply, with no strong or greatly changed or improved public sentiment behind it, would be simply a target for abuse by the Tammany orators or newspapers, even if it tried to rise above the condition of its origin. There may come a time when New York will be able to support with impunity a large home legislature, with full control of the municipal finances, but it will not be until the traditions of the present *régime* have perished or have been greatly weakened. If such a body were elected now, it would be two-

thirds filled with the kind of persons who now compose the Tammany Executive Committee. Men of good standing and character on both sides would be unwilling to enter it, and it would probably be as venal as the Albany Legislature, if not as the Board of Aldermen, and we should have the air filled with stories of "deals" and "jobs" through most of the year. It would naturally, and, indeed, properly, represent the view of municipal government now held by the bulk of the voters of both parties—the view, namely, that the main object of elections is to decide which of the two parties shall have the control and distribution of the salaried municipal offices.

This is the meaning which the term "politics" now bears in the minds of nine out of ten inhabitants of the city. Of an election as a means of deciding which of two conflicting policies in the management of city affairs shall prevail, the very memory has almost all been lost. When you talk of such an election as a possibility to a very large proportion even of the more intelligent class of the community, you are apt to be set down as visionary and as occupied with schemes which, if practicable anywhere, will only be practicable in the New Jerusalem. We cannot at present get two rival systems of rapid transit, for instance, or two rival schemes of street paving, or two rival systems of taxation, submitted to the popular vote. The only question we can get passed on at the polls is which set of politicians shall have the handling of the money which the scheme—any scheme—will cost. This is our "politics" at present. It is this "politics" which a large municipal council, or any municipal council which had control of the finances, would, in the present state of the public mind, represent.

Now, it is because this state of mind prevails, to all outward appearance, among the intelligent and wealthy just as much as among the poor and ignorant, that the power of the semi-criminal organization known as Tammany Hall over the latter not only remains unshaken, but grows stronger from year to year. Every year its management descends, with perfect impunity, into the hands of a more and more degraded class. This year only one regular honest calling is represented in its Executive Committee. But no Republican is able to make any appeal to the better instincts of the Tammany voters based on the loftier views or the purer practice of his own party. He cannot try to sow in the minds of such

voters the seeds of civic pride, because he cannot point to any signs of such pride among his own people. He cannot descant on the folly or wickedness of sacrificing the interests of the city to Federal interests, because he does that very thing himself whenever he gets a chance. He votes for the mayor with a view to affecting the election to the Presidency, or in order to help or hinder legislation on the tariff. He assists this year in ousting a good man from a city office, or in putting a weaker one in, solely as a preparation for getting control of the custom-house or post-office some other year. In fact, he shows no more concern in his municipal action for the physical and moral welfare of Pat or Hans in a tenement-house on Avenue A than Pat or Hans shows for him in his brown-stone dwelling on Madison Avenue.

It is impossible for any one who goes canvassing among Tammany voters on behalf of the municipal welfare to point to a good example of any kind, or to any striking evidences of what I may call a municipal conscience, among the property-holders who grumble so fiercely about the smallness of the return they get in New York for their taxes. In no city in Christendom to-day have the poor been left by their more fortunate neighbors and fellow-citizens so completely as in this to the tender mercies of demagogues and thieves and imposters. The attempt to get rid of responsibility for their social and moral and physical surroundings by proffering them religious instruction or free pews in Protestant churches, while treating the condition of their dwellings, the police which protects them, the courts from which they get their justice, the hospitals in which they find refuge from sickness and misfortune, the sanitary regulations from which they acquire their notions of American decency and order, as "politics," with which clergymen and business men, and "nice people" generally, cannot be expected to have anything to do, is surely taking the lowest view of it—an immense shame and scandal; but it fully explains the municipal situation at present.

The conclusion to which all this brings us, if it be well founded, is that the work of municipal reform is really a work of education. No change in the machinery of government would do us any good without a radical change in the way of looking at municipal administration on the part of the more intelligent class of voters. There never has been an occasion in politics which

called more distinctly for a rending of our hearts rather than of our garments. That a change in the direction I have indicated will be difficult, and need a good deal of time to become thoroughly effective, there is no doubt. The tendency of men who are engaged in political movements of any kind to act within party lines, and to prefer party associates for all places of trust, is very strong and has a good deal to be said for it. It is doubtless easier to work in city affairs with those with whom we have been accustomed to work in Federal and State affairs. We have a confidence in their motives and a comprehension of their point of view which are apt to be wanting with regard to opponents in other fields. It is hard to believe that a Democrat is aiming at the things that we are aiming at in local affairs, knowing how widely separated from him we are in national or State affairs.

Nor is there anything novel or peculiarly American in this difficulty. It has been fully experienced by reformers in other countries. The old municipalities in England were hot-beds of politics in our sense of the term. But it has been overcome. In all the great cities of parliamentary European countries, in one way or another the lesson of treating the municipality as a business corporation has been learned, and is acted on. Radicals and Conservatives have learned, as a solemn duty, to treat cleanliness, and police and drainage, and water supply as questions of business and philanthropy to be settled on their own merits, from which there is, for honest and humane men, no escape. In this lies the solution of the great municipal problem. There is no other way in which modern cities can be saved.

E. L. GODKIN.